DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 162 334 CS 204 512

AUTHOR Horner, Winifred B.
TITLE Speech-Act and Text-Act Theory: "Theme-ing" in Freshman Composition.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (29th, Denver, Colorado, March 30-April 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); *English Instruction; Higher Education; Language Usage; *Models; Theories; Writing Skills; *Written Language
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Process

ABSTRACT

In contrast to a speech-act theory that is limited by a simple speaker/hearer relationship, a text-act theory of written language allows for the historical or personal context of a writer and reader, both in the written work itself and in the act of reading. This theory can be applied to theme writing, essay examinations, and revision in the college composition class through the theme writing process of the student (the context writer) and the theme grading of the professor (the context reader). If this text-act model is to provide perspective on such writing problems as meaning and intention and offer possible solutions, it is necessary for the professor and the student to identify all of the participants in the theme writing act and to define their roles and intentions. The text-act model can also help students recognize the illocutionary force behind examination questions and offers assistance in the revision process where the writer and the text-act person are the same. (MAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Winifred B. Horner

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Winifred B. Horner
318 Arts and Science
University of Missouri-Columbia
Columbia, Missouri 65211

ED162334

Speech-Act and Text-Act Theory: "Theme-ing" in Freshman Composition

Linguists traditionally consider language as having three components: the semantic component, the syntactic component, and the phonetic or graphic component. But these components offer an incomplete view of the ways in which communication takes place and meaning is construed. Scholars see the need for a fourth language component--the rhetorical component. Speech-Act Theory first formulated by J. L. Austin in 1962[1] and refined by John Searle in 1969[2] is an attempt to formulate the linguistic rules for such a component. Speech-Act Theory, like rhetoric, is based on the premise that language is action. It also assumes that the transfer of meaning depends on certain linguistic rules or conventions shared by members of a language community.

CS204512

The rhetorical component as outlined in Speech-Act Theory includes those special rules or conventions which would allow a hearer to understand "Can you lend me $100," as a request under certain regular rule-governed circumstances and as a question under certain other regular circumstances. In a request the speaker assumes that the hearer is able to perform the act. If I ask a banker, who I know is able to lend me $100, the statement is intended as and acts as a request; if I meet a friend who I doubt has $100, it acts as a true question. Similarly, "I promise I will win the election," can be either a promise or a threat depending on how the speaker and the hearer view the desirability of winning the election--the propositional content of the text. To a constituent who supports the candidate, it is a promise, while to an opponent it acts as a threat.

It appears that the transfer of meaning in these situations depends to some extent on the relations between the speaker and hearer: the way that they view the ability to perform an action, and the desirability of that action. Speech-Act Theory represents the first attempt to formulate the linguistic rules whereby participants in a language act produce and construe meaning on the basis of their relationships to each other and to elements in the context. According to Searle, that meaning depends on the speaker's intention in the illocutionary force of the text as understood by the hearer (p. 48). Searle also recognizes another kind of intentionality in language which he terms the perlocutionary intent or force--the intended effect which the language act has on the hearer (p. 25).

In the consideration of written texts, Speech-Act Theory presents exciting possibilities as well as serious limitations. Immediate questions present themselves. The first pertains to the identity of the participants, which in written language appears more complex than the simple speaker/hearer duality of Speech-Act Theory. Obviously the "I" in "My Last Duchess" is not Robert Browning nor is the "you" the reader. Just as obviously the "I" in "Civil Disobedience" is Thoreau, but who then is the "you"? Is it the original reader, or is it the twentieth century reader? Then what relationship does the contemporary reader have to the nineteenth-century reader or, for that matter, to the many other readers of the essay? Then too what is the difference in the relationships between Thoreau and the "I" in his text and between Browning and the "I" in his text? Speech-Act Theory with its simple speaker/hearer duality cannot adequately encompass such questions.

In order to deal with some of these questions, I have formulated a theory which I call "Text-Act Theory."[3] It is an extension of the precepts of Speech-Act Theory to account for written texts: for the pastness of writers and their presence within the text, as well as for the pastness of readers and their presence in the act of reading. Speech-Act Theory deals primarily with spoken discourse where speakers and hearers are both physically present and physically attached to the text. Instead of a single speaker in "My Last Duchess," Text-Act Theory allows for the writer in the context (CW), Browning; and for the voice within the text (TW), the Duke of Ferrara; instead of a single hearer it allows for a context reader (CR), Browning's intended

reader; and a reader within the text (TR), the agent for the Count of Tyrol; as well as the text-act reader present in every individual reading. (See figure 1).

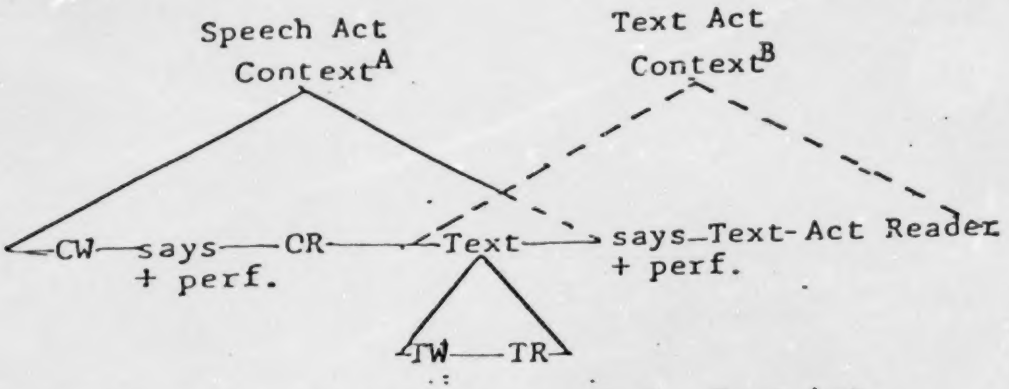

Fig. 1: The Speech Act and the Text Act

Speech-Act Theory sees the text as action on the part of the speaker or writer; Text-Act Theory sees the text as action on the part of the text-act reader. Consequently, Text-Act Theory entails at least two contexts for any written text. The first is the historical or personal context^{A} of a writer and a reader or group of readers in the original speech act of writing; the second is context^{B}, the act of reading which changes with each individual text-act reader. The shared element of both contexts is the text.

Within this model (Figure 1) Text-Act Theory allows for the many readers who may be involved in a letter to the editor. The text reader within the text (TR) is the editor to whom the letter is technically addressed, the context reader (CR) is any of the customary readers of the newspaper to whom the writer's concerns are actually addressed, and the text-act reader may be anyone of those persons or anyone else who may in different contexts of time and place read the letter. Thus the text act is any individual

reading of a text by a single reader. If one reads a poem at the age of sixteen and again fifteen years later, those are two individual text acts within two separate contexts with two closely similar readers. If two persons together read a poem aloud at the same time and in the same place, those are also two individual text acts with two separate readers in closely similar contexts.

Text-Act Theory sees the written text as having a hierarchy of writers and readers, present in the text, past in the context, as well as present in each succeeding text act. It further sees the written text as having no existence outside of each individual text act. As Wellek and Warren conceive of the literary work as "the actual experience of each of its many readers," so also Text-Act Theory sees the life of the text in the individual text acts of its many text-act readers.[4]

With this very brief explanantion of Text-Act Theory, I would like to apply that theory to three language acts in the composition class: theme writing, essay exams, and revision. I suggest that in theme writing the student is performing a very specialized speech act and that in theme grading the instructor is performing a second equally specialized text act; the two acts involve a complex network of relationships of which not only students but also professors are only partially aware.

In most theme-writing acts, the context writer is the student, the context reader is the professor. Within the theme, as in articles or essays, the student text writer "I" is identical to the context writer in context.[A] The reader within the text is usually identical

to both the context reader and the text-act reader--who is the professor. The speech act in context^{A} is the writing of the theme; the text act in context^{B} is its reading.

The performative, or illocutionary force of the theme speech act does not follow the preparatory rules of an assertion or statement, the illocutionary force usually present in an article or essay.

1. S has evidence for the truth of proposition.
2. It is not obvious to both S and H that H knows or does not need to be reminded of proposition (p. 66).

The student obviously is urged and attempts to fulfill the first condition, but when an instructor asks a student to write a theme on some aspect of literature, "Compare two female characters in Shakespeare," rule 2 does not hold. It becomes instead:

2. It is obvious to both S and H that H probably knows and does not need to be reminded of proposition.

Thus, writing a theme or "theme-ing" becomes a very specialized illocutionary act, an explanation for the equally specialized use of the word "theme" as those things which students write in composition classes. The term is never applied to professional articles or essays, because the illocutionary force is unique to the theme and to no other language act.

The preparatory rules for "theme-ing" would be as follows:

1. S has evidence for the truth of proposition.
2. It is obvious to both S and H that H probably knows and does not need to be reminded of proposition.
3. S intends to show H that S can state proposition in conventional written form.

When the perlocutionary effect of "theme-ing" is examined, the speech act becomes even more complex. Of the half million themes written by students in the last decade for or against abortion, few have been written with the intention of persuading a professor. The intended perlocutionary effect is, of course, to achieve a good grade. From the student's point of view, theme writing is an unreal and dreary process.

The text-act model also offers insight into the reading act of the professor. First, he or she reads the theme to see if the student has evidence for the truth of what is said, and, second, the instructor reads the theme to judge whether the student has used conventional written form in stating the text. The instructor does not "need to know nor really wish to be reminded" of anything the student has to say. No wonder that particular text act, called theme reading, is a tiresome procedure and an equally dreary process.

The text-act model can serve not only to furnish perspective from which to see the problems in theme writing, but, also, within the model solutions to those problems become evident.

One solution is obvious: the possibility of requiring the student to address a particular reader or group of readers TW, well defined either by the student or by the professor. Thus a reader might be delineated as being a university administrator, over 40, male, white, etc., or a group of readers might be defined as business men in a small midwestern community. Then the student may assume that the reader may really wish to be informed and possibly persuaded. In assuming a special carefully defined reader, the student virtually removes the

professor--from the text itself. The professor's responsibility in this situation is one of role-playing--to see one's self as the text reader and to establish a pretended identity relation between the reader and one's self as the text-act reader. At the least, the instructor can read the text with full awareness of who the text reader is supposed to be. In Text-Act Theory, just as the twentieth-century reader is able to recognize Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" as a persuasive essay for the nineteenth-century reader and not be persuaded to action, so also can a professor read a theme for a special audience and judge it informative although he need not necessarily be informed by it.

A second solution is to have students write on subjects on which they are truly more informed than the professor, thus invoking the illocutionary force of the true article or essay.

> It is not obvious to both S and H that H knows or does not need to be reminded of proposition.

Papers which deal with nursing, theatre lighting, skiing, student government, or any other topic on which the student is more knowledgeable than the professor almost always result in better writing.

A third solution is to change the actual text-act reader to another student in the class, or to an instructor in another course, thus eliminating the writing professor from the context. The judgement would then be made by real readers on the basis of the real informative or persuasive success of the theme.

All of these solutions are obviously only partial and each has its drawbacks. First, it is almost impossible to remove theme writing from the student-professor-grade context. Second, professors are not

always skillful at playing the role of a reader who is presumed uneducated or prejudiced. Third, when students are asked to write on topics which they know, they are inclined to view those subjects as trivial, which they often are, and professors are inclined to view them as dull, which they often are. Fourth, when students are asked to judge other student papers, their critical judgement is often inadequate or underdeveloped. Finally, when the judgement of professors in other courses is used, the game-ing in theme writing is compounded since, in most college courses, professors ask students to write papers not to inform them about a subject, but to inform them of what they, the students, know about the subject. In the end none of these solutions really works.

The only real answer to the dilemma is for the student and the professor to look honestly at the theme-writing act in the composition class and to recognize the illocutionary force involved in "theme-ing." They need to identify all of the participants and define their own roles and intentions. With a clear view of "theme-ing" the student can see the importance of defining a special text reader and the instructor, in turn, can respond by identifying as closely as possible with that text reader. Only in this way can the student and the professor recognize their responsibilities in the speech act and the text act.

In conclusion, Text-Act Theory can help the student in two other language acts: the essay exam and revision. Searle points out the difference between the true question and the exam question:

> There are two kinds of questions, (a) real questions, (b) exam questions. In real questions S wants to know (find out) the answer; in exam questions, S wants to know if H knows the answer (p. 67).

If students recognize the illocutionary force behind exam questions, they can respond with appropriate speech acts by informing the professor of what they, the students, know. Sophisticated students are well aware, perhaps unconsciously, of their rhetorical act in writing an exam. Less sophisticated students need to be made aware of the illocutionary intent of this language act.

Another process which might be more understandable within the text-act model is that of revision. In revision there exists the peculiar situation where the writer and the text-act reader are one and the same person. The act of revision necessitates the writer becoming the text-act reader and assuming the role of the text reader. Text-Act Theory explains why revision and editing are easier when a paper is put aside for a week or two: thus one gains the temporal and physical distancing necessary for editing in distancing one's self as reader from one's self as writer.

Speech-Act Theory and Text-Act Theory, in seeing the complexity in the language act, offer insights into meaning and intention as dependent on participants and their relationships in the written text. By seeing their place in the text-act model, students and professors can respond appropriately in the context of the essay exam, theme writing and revision, and theme reading. More inportantly, in examining the real illocutionary force behind these writing acts, students and instructors together are able to see the significance of the rhetorical component in all language acts.

Winifred B. Horner
318 Arts and Science
University of Missouri-Columbia
Columbia, Missouri 65211

Notes

[1]J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[2]John R. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). All further references to this work appear in the text.

[3]See Winifred B. Horner, "Text-Act Theory: A Study of Non-Fiction Texts," Diss. University of Michigan 1975.

[4]Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1973), p. 139.